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Author: Aleksandra Szymańska-Tworek

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Aleksandra Szymańska-Tworek

Language-Testing Ideology from an ELF Perspective – Scheme of a Study

Koncepcja ewaluacji umiejętności językowych z perspektywy języka angielskiego rozumianego jako *lingua franca*. Zarys studium

Streszczenie: W ciągu ostatnich dwóch dekad rozwinęła się żywiołowa dyskusja koncentrująca się wokół związków pomiędzy koncepcją języka angielskiego, rozumianego jako *lingua franca* (ELF), a koncepcją ewaluacji umiejętności językowych. Jednym z głównych argumentów powtarzających się w tej dyskusji pozostaje twierdzenie, że tak fundamentalna zmiana w postrzeganiu języka angielskiego wymaga również zmian w koncepcji testowania. Jednocześnie oponenci tego stanowiska uważają włączenie koncepcji ELF do praktyk ewaluacji umiejętności językowych za niemożliwe, ponieważ realia testowania nie przystają w wielu aspektach do nowego paradygmatu. Autorka niniejszego artykułu stawia sobie więc za zadanie omówienie wybranych zagadnień związanych z tą debatą z perspektywy badacza oraz nauczyciela. W końcowej części artykułu autorka formułuje zarys szerszych badań mających na celu analizę odbioru koncepcji ELF wśród grupy młodych nauczycieli-stażystów.

Słowa kluczowe: język angielski jako *lingua franca*, stażyści, koncepcja testowania, postrzeganie

1. Introduction

Nowadays when we talk about the English language, we often use terms which emphasise its unique status. We say “English as a *lingua franca*” (which we often abbreviate to “ELF”), “English as an international language” or “English as a global language.” We even use the plural and say “World Englishes” or “New Englishes” to indicate that the English-speaking world encompasses a broad range of different varieties. This tendency to approach English from

a global perspective is nicely encapsulated in a statement put forward by WATERTON: "it has become almost *de rigueur* to collocate the word 'English' with 'world', 'international' or 'global'" (2011: 42). This statement dates back to 2011 but it can be argued that today, in 2016, it has become even more true. English is no longer associated exclusively with the Anglophone countries and far more often recognised as a tool of international communication.

The question we may want to ask is whether this multiplicity of English(es) is relevant to teaching. Should the fact that English has become a contemporary lingua franca on a worldwide scale carry implications for what happens in the classroom? Indeed, there is a group of scholars (e.g., CANAGARAJAH 2006, JENKINS 2006, SEIDLHOFER 2004) who claim that it should. However, what is more relevant within the framework of the present paper is the fact that if the changed role of English carries implications for teaching, it also carries implications for testing because of the backwash effect. As pertinently observed by JENKINS (2006: 42), teachers and students will oppose any changes in the curriculum which are not reflected in requirements specified by the language testing community.

2. ELF in teaching and testing: Researchers' perspective

This brings us to a further question: In what ways is the diversification of the English language relevant to English language testing, particularly to high-stakes international proficiency tests? As put by HAMID (2014: 264f), the topic divided researchers into two camps. There are those (e.g., DAVIES, HAMP-LYONS, KEMP 2003; ELDER, DAVIES 2006; DAVIES 2009) who acknowledge the multiplicity of Englishes, but argue for British and American norms for international tests. There are also scholars (e.g., DAVIDSON 2006, LOWENBERG 2002, BROWN 2004, CANAGARAJAH 2006, JENKINS 2006) who argue for the relevance of all English varieties and their norms. Needless to say, such an egalitarian approach to testing is a controversial proposal. After all, testing agencies need to construct tests in relation to some standard. Let us examine some of the arguments put forward by the latter group of scholars in support of their way of thinking.

JENKINS (2006: 43ff) offers a number of examples of current testing practices which, according to her, are not compatible with the current role that the English language has assumed. What she claims is that test-takers are often expected to produce English which is more "correct" than that of native-speaker English. For instance, they are supposed to adhere to standard written grammar even in speaking activities. Jenkins adduces two examples: "there's five cars in my picture" and "I've got less cars in my picture." These two forms are likely to be

penalised in an exam, despite the fact that both “there are” and “fewer” followed by plural countable nouns are rare in spoken native-speaker English. A different example offered by Jenkins is that test-takers are likely to be rewarded for the knowledge of such forms as “two teas” or “three coffees,” but penalised for extending this rule to “two wines,” even though this and similar forms are standard in many of the nativised English varieties in the Outer Circle.

Jenkins adduces more examples of similar testing procedures and many more can be found elsewhere (e.g., HALL 2014; JENKINS, LEUNG 2013). They are not discussed here because of space constraints. However, the message seems to be clear. The premise behind these examples is that current testing practices do not reflect the unique status of the English language. What is more, such testing practices send a strong message to classroom practitioners that what students need is close adherence to native-speaker norms. Needless to say, there are many strong arguments why testing should not change at all (they are adduced, e.g., in ELDER, HARDING 2008). What seems to be needed, however, is a discussion between researchers, teachers and testing practitioners so that teaching and testing are relevant to students’ needs.

3. ELF in teaching and testing: Teachers’ perspective

The foregoing part of the paper discusses how the shift in the use of English is approached by researchers. The point to which we shall now turn is how the emergence of ELF is assessed by classroom practitioners. DEWEY (2012: 141ff) reports on his study whose aim was to find out from teachers about their knowledge of and responses to ELF. More specifically, Dewey was interested to examine the relationship between theory and practice. This is a large-scale study that concerns many different aspects of teaching and testing; for the purpose of the present paper only a small fragment of it is discussed.

Dewey’s study was conducted in England among a group of experienced teachers of English, all native speakers of this language, who were asked to complete a questionnaire. The questionnaire consisted of three parts. The first section asked participants to define three key terms connected with the ELF perspective: “English as a global language,” “World Englishes” and “English as a lingua franca.” Respondents were also asked to write comments on whether these concepts are relevant to teaching. In the second part of the questionnaire teachers were asked to rate a number of English varieties: British English, American English, Australian English, Indian English, Singaporean English, other Outer Circle varieties and Expanding Circle Englishes. Participants were asked to rate each variety on a scale from 0 (not at all) to 5 (very) in terms of

its importance. In the last section, respondents were asked to evaluate a series of utterances that have been selected from ELF corpora as typical features of ELF-based interaction. For each sentence respondents were asked to give a rating score on a number of dimensions. In the present paper two dimensions are discussed – acceptability and importance (in terms of being “corrected” in the classroom).

Moving on to the results of the study, Dewey observes that the sampled population have a growing awareness of ELF. Not only are they aware of the concepts, they show an advanced understanding of them. Several teachers provide precise and nuanced definitions. However, when asked to comment on the relevance of ELF to teaching, respondents display far less consensus. In order to show this broad range of teacher perceptions, Dewey provides a number of quotations and particularly draws our attention to two of them:

They are all relevant. Student needs change depending on what aspect of language they need to learn, improve, develop and what for [...]. (Eve)

A nice idea but a bit pie-in-the-sky, at least until a lot of people (students, teachers, govt./education/examination policy-makers, general public...) change their perception of what language is, and what it means to know/be able to use a language. Sorry :-((Adam)

These two quotations present what seem to be two opposite approaches. The author of the first statement, Eve, claims that the concepts “English as a lingua franca,” “English as a global language” and “World Englishes” are all relevant to teaching. Adam, on the other hand, adopts a far less ELF-oriented stance and argues that changing teaching in accordance with ELF is impractical or fanciful.

Taking a look at the variety ratings (Tables 1 and 2), the responses of Eve and Adam correspond closely with their comments in response to the relevance question.

Table 1

Variety ratings (Eve)

Please rate the following varieties in terms of importance, indicating from 0 (not at all important) to 5 (very important)	
American English	5
British English	5
Australian English	5
Indian English	5
Singaporean English	5
Other Outer Circle Varieties	5
Expanding Circle Englishes	5

Source: DEWEY (2012: 154)

As we would expect from a teacher who renders ELF as relevant to teaching, Eve considers all varieties of English, including non-codified Englishes of the Expanding Circle, as very important. She further reinforces her positive disposition towards the ELF ideology by adding a comment: “any type of English makes up the whole body of language.” Contrastingly, Adam provides a very different perspective:

Table 2

Variety ratings (Adam)

Please rate the following varieties in terms of importance, indicating from 0 (not at all important) to 5 (very important)	
American English	4
British English	5
Australian English	3
Indian English	2
Singaporean English	2
Other Outer Circle Varieties	2
Expanding Circle Englishes	1

Source: DEWEY (2012: 154)

Even though American and Australian English are Inner Circle varieties, they are perceived by Adam as less important than the British variety. Outer Circle varieties are also given a low rating, whereas Expanding Circle Englishes are considered the least important.

However, the full picture of the study gets more complicated as the final section of Dewey’s questionnaire provides contradictory findings for these two teachers. Although it is Eve who has so far seemed to be far more willing to adopt the ELF perspective, her evaluation of non-standard utterances (Table 3) does not confirm this finding. Even more surprisingly, the results of the language evaluation task suggest that it is Adam who in practical terms is closer to an ELF-compatible orientation than Eve (Table 4).

Table 3

Evaluation task (Eve)

<i>We need to discuss about the problem.</i>						
X	0	1	2	3	4	5
Acceptable		✓				
Important to correct				✓		
<i>Last summer I was happy because I finally took my driving licence.</i>						
X	0	1	2	3	4	5
Acceptable	✓					
Important to correct					✓	
<i>I enjoy listening classical music.</i>						
X	0	1	2	3	4	5
Acceptable		✓				
Important to correct				✓		

Source: DEWEY (2012:157)

Although Eve reports that ELF and World Englishes are relevant to teaching and that English encompasses all codified and non-codified varieties of this language, she renders non-standard forms presented in the study as unacceptable. This can be put in contrast to a perspective adopted by Adam:

Table 4

Evaluation task (Adam)

<i>We need to discuss about the problem.</i>						
X	0	1	2	3	4	5
Acceptable				✓		
Important to correct			✓			
<i>Last summer I was happy because I finally took my driving licence.</i>						
X	0	1	2	3	4	5
Acceptable						✓
Important to correct		✓				
<i>I enjoy listening classical music.</i>						
X	0	1	2	3	4	5
Acceptable						✓
Important to correct		✓				

Source: DEWEY (2012: 156)

Adam reports far less concern about correcting these utterances than Eve and many other teachers in the study. In fact, non-standard forms that most respondents judge to be unacceptable are considered by Adam to be largely acceptable and relatively unimportant to correct.

Concluding the results of his study Dewey observes that it is not the fact that teachers have different opinions that is surprising. It is natural that different educational backgrounds and life stories result in different approaches. What is striking however is the apparent unpredictability of how teachers' professed views get translated into their classroom routine. In order to explain the contradictory results of his study, Dewey talks about the duality inherent in teachers' professional responsibilities. On the one hand, teachers are obliged to respond to the immediate learning needs of their students. On the other hand, teachers have institutional responsibilities which are often determined by norm-based language testing practices. Again, to repeat the premise from the beginning of this paper, if the requirements specified by examination boards are not reflected in the curriculum, they are bound to be met with resistance. The following section discusses how this unclear relationship between theory and practice pointed out by Dewey inspired my own research project.

4. Scheme of a study

Dewey's results inspired me to conduct a study whose aim would be to examine how ELF-friendly are my respondents and whether their receptiveness to ELF gets reflected in their approach to testing. The study is intended to be conducted among English philology students who study to become teachers of English. The tools I want to use to collect data are questionnaire, narratives (in the form of position statements) and background questionnaire.

The questionnaire includes two components: statements and sentences. Dewey gave his respondents a number of terms to define and state whether they are relevant to teaching. Instead of this, I plan to give my respondents statements (see Appendix A) which they rank from 1 to 5 and whose purpose is to determine the extent to which my respondents are ELF-friendly. Then, as in Dewey's study, respondents will be given sentences (see Appendix B) which include language structures enumerated by ELF scholars (COGO, DEWEY 2006; ERLING, BARTLETT 2006; PITZL, BREITENEDER, KLIMPFINGER 2008; RANTA 2006; SEIDLHOFER 2004) as features of ELF. Participants will be asked to rank the sentences from 1 to 5 on three dimensions: intelligibility, acceptability, importance (in terms of being "corrected" in the classroom). The purpose of this part of the study is to examine the extent to which subjects are receptive towards the ELF ideology and whether this receptiveness finds its reflection at a more practical level.

In the second part of the study respondents will be asked to write position statements in which they express their opinion on whether the emergence of ELF and the changed role of English carry implications for teaching and testing of this language. This part of the study is intended to extend and clarify the findings obtained through questionnaires.

Dewey's study points to the unpredictability of teachers' stance with regard to normativity. The unclear relationship between theory and practice raises a question about variables which make respondents accept or reject ELF both in theory and in practice. The final part of my study aims to obtain information about a number of factors which are hypothesised to exert influence on respondents' positioning. In the background questionnaire participants will be asked about the frequency of their contacts with native and non-native speakers of English and about their learning and teaching experience.

The study was conducted in May 2016 at the Institute of English of the Philology Department, University of Silesia.

5. Conclusion

The English language is becoming more and more often associated with international and intercultural communication. This new sociolinguistic reality of English is argued by many to carry implications for how the language is taught and tested. What specifically should change is a moot point. There are also voices saying that teachers and testing practitioners work within many constraints which make it impossible for them to introduce any changes to their classroom routine. It is especially in the domain of testing where embracing the ELF perspective seems difficult. However, to repeat the sentiment from the beginning of this paper, what seems to be needed is a discussion on this topic and a dialogue between researchers, teachers and examination boards. My own research project, inspired by Dewey's results, is intended to examine the reception of ELF among a sampled group of trainee teachers and whether this inclination (or lack thereof) to accept ELF in theory finds its reflection in their approach to testing. It is hoped that the study contributes to the debate concerning the spread of English and its classroom implications.

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Appendix A – statements

Please rank the following statements on a scale from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree):

1. In the classroom pupils should have contact with many different **native** varieties of English (e.g. Australian English, Canadian English).
2. In the classroom pupils should have contact with many different **nativised** varieties of English (e.g. Indian English, Singaporean English).
3. In the classroom pupils should have contact with many **non-native** varieties of English (e.g. German English, Russian English).
4. In the classroom pupils should have contact with examples of the most extensive contemporary use of English worldwide – English as a lingua franca.
5. Exposing pupils **exclusively** to British and American English in the classroom is insufficient to prepare them for international communication.
6. In the recordings that pupils listen to in the classroom there should be examples of non-understanding or miscommunication that was successfully overcome by the use of communication strategies.
7. It is important that teachers train pupils on how to behave in case of miscommunication by showing them different accommodation strategies, for example, making things explicit, asking for repetition or topic change.
8. Pupils at school should be prepared for communication **primarily** with native-speakers of English.
9. Textbooks used by schoolchildren should present many characters of non-native speakers using English in non-Anglophone contexts (e.g., French and German people in Spain).
10. My pupils do not have to sound native-like. It is more important that they are able to communicate effectively in English.
11. I don't think it is important to correct pupils' pronunciation mistakes if I understand what they are saying.
12. It doesn't bother me when my pupils substitute the sound /θ/ (as in *Thursday*) with /t/ or /f/ as long as they are intelligible.
13. It doesn't bother me when my pupils prefer to speak English with a Polish accent.
14. It is important that teachers make a lot of effort to make their pupils sound as native as possible.
15. My university teachers should acquaint me with different accents and varieties of English.

Appendix B – sentences

You are a teacher. The following sentences were produced by a student of yours. The student is taking her Matura exam this year. Please, rate the following sentences from 1 (not at all) to 5 (very) on two dimensions: “intelligibility” and “important to correct”:

1. Yesterday my mum did a delicious chocolate cake.
2. The girl which sat beside him was his daughter.
3. Warsaw is Polish city.
4. I need to contact with my parents.
5. He like fast cars.
6. How long time did it take you to solve this problem?
7. I am interested to see the results of this study.
8. I am hating this awful weather!
9. She gave me an advice that I'll never forget.
10. I am here since two o'clock.
11. I know that even if I would practice the rest of my life, I would never be good enough.
12. She plays the piano beautiful.
13. You remembered to feed the cat, isn't it?
14. He suffers from claustrophobicy so he never travels on underground trains.
15. The research examined the effects of alcohol on long-term memory.